

Profession, Autonomy, and the Intelligentsia in Central European Perspective

Introductory Remarks

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Special editors of the block

Over the past few decades, numerous authors have explored the concept and history of professionalisation.¹ However, studies of professions are most often conducted within a national framework, and there are relatively few examples of research that has explicitly set out to compare experiences across different countries. When starting our work in the Research Group on the History of Professionalisation,² therefore, we aimed to examine the history of professionalisation processes in Hungary from a comparative perspective across time and space. Our goal was to explore, from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the decisive processes in the history of professions in Hungary.

The studies presented in the recent volume of HSCE are also products of this research. Drawing on the concept of professionalisation in their publications, the members of the research group situate Hungarian processes within an international historical context—and simultaneously within the international discourse. Our consistent application of comparative analytical methods reveals how Hungarian social development fitted into the broader European context, thereby providing an

1 Some of the numerous examples: McClelland, Merl, and Siegrist, eds., *Professionen in modernen Osteuropa. / Professions in Modern Eastern Europe*; Siegrist, “The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Europe”; Magos, “Mérlegen a hivatások”; Halmos and Szívós, “Hivatások a köztudatban és a modern történetírásban”; Siegrist, “Professionelle Autonomie in der modernen Gesellschaft, Wissenschaft und Kultur.”

2 The Research Group was founded by the research fund: NFKIH 132451, 2019–2024.

opportunity to better understand the specific characteristics of professionalisation processes in Hungary.

The approach and methodology of comparative historical analysis are essential for our project. By comparing historical societies in different contexts (through exploring their similarities and differences), we pursued multiple goals. On the one hand, we contribute to the theoretical literature on professions by refining, nuancing, or even critiquing the claims made therein. Second, through an in-depth examination of selected professions, we contributed to a deeper understanding of the processes unfolding in the societies under study and the diverse forces affecting professions and, through comparison, we placed the development of each society into perspective.³ Finally, we considered it of paramount importance to include in the discourse the Central and Eastern European region, which has been under-researched from the perspective of the history of professions. Regarding the latter point, it is also noteworthy that few analyses have been conducted in the region using the professionalisation paradigm, research questions, and terminology that we consistently employed. For this reason—as shown by the texts in this section—comparative analyses are often asymmetrical: authors may rely on different levels of source material and analysis when comparing the elements of the comparison. However, as confirmed by the literature on comparative historical research, this need not necessarily be viewed as a shortcoming; instead, it is better to turn these circumstances into a strength by designing the case studies in such a way that they allow as much space as possible for understanding the unique context, and “a detective-style analysis which seeks to highlight the causal impact of particular factors within particular cases.”⁴

The literature on professionalisation identifies autonomy as one of the main characteristics of professions.⁵ The examination of the history of various professions reveals that autonomy is not merely a retrospective criterion developed by researchers, but a dimension that repeatedly appears in contemporary discussions and influences the actions of both members and organisations within those professions.

The concept of autonomy derives from combining the Greek words *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law, rule). In its literal sense, autonomy denotes a person's self-imposed law—a framework for action that is subject to internal norms, rather than external constraints. As early as the Antiquity, this meaning already carried political and ethical connotations. In modern social sciences, it has acquired a key role, particularly in the analysis of professions.

3 Vigour, “Comparison, a Founding Approach in the Social Sciences,” 217.

4 Lange, *Comparative-Historical Method*, 4.

5 In an article aimed primarily at a social science audience, we have already addressed the issue of autonomy (Keller and Kiss, “Hivatások autonómiája,” 7–16).

In modern societies, autonomy is primarily functionally significant for professions. Professions, such as medical, legal, or educational practice, perform activities that require a high degree of expertise, knowledge that is difficult to verify, and ethical responsibility. In these activities, only to a limited extent can lay oversight be enforced; therefore, society is compelled to grant professionals a certain degree of freedom in decision-making, i.e., autonomy.

Thus, autonomy is not a mere privilege but a structural necessity. It enables professionals to act based on their expertise and ethical standards, free from external pressures. However, autonomy is contingent upon social legitimacy, institutional frameworks, and trust. The following section examines how professionalisation theories interpret autonomy and its role in the development and functioning of professions.

The role of autonomy in professionalisation theories

The historical context

Theories of professionalisation did not originate from timeless categories, but sought to answer specific historical and social problems.⁶ The modernisation processes of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—industrialisation, urbanisation, the deepening division of labour, and the expansion of state functions—gave rise to new occupational and social roles. These social positions, endowed with specific rights and obligations, began to be referred to as professions. Experts sensitive to societal changes were concerned with how and why certain occupations developed into privileged professions and how their social status changed.

Social changes during the interwar period intensified these questions. The Great Depression weakened confidence in free-market systems, while the Soviet Union offered a state-bureaucratic alternative. In the United States and Western Europe, attention shifted to institutional solutions between the market and the state. Professions emerged as a “third way,” with experts using their moral commitment and scientific knowledge to serve the public interest and mediate between the market and the state.

Early theories of professionalisation mainly offered contemporary analysis. A historical perspective, focusing on the long-term development of professions, became prominent only in the 1960s, when comparative historical studies began to interpret professional development within broader state and economic transformations.

6 In our introduction, we partly follow the logic of Magos’s work (Magos, “Mérlegen a hivatások,” 138–57) when reviewing the paradigm of professionalisation. However, other approaches are also possible for reviewing the history of professions, e.g., Siegrist, “Professionalization/Professions in History.”

Autonomy as privilege: the functionalist model

The classical functionalist approach, represented most notably by Talcott Parsons, described professions as key agents of social integration. In his study of North American society, Parsons observed that certain professions—such as doctors, teachers, and lawyers—enjoy exceptional social status and prestige. However, this is not an inherent privilege, but rather society's recognition of these professions. Professionals acquire the knowledge necessary to practice their profession, as well as a shared set of values and ethical standards, through long, formalised (thus expensive, time-consuming, and demanding) education.⁷

Functionalist theory holds that these professions act altruistically, serving the public good. Society grants them autonomy, allowing them to take independent professional decisions. This autonomy is maintained through self-regulation, such as professional associations and ethical policies defined by the members of the profession, while the state supports these structures through legal recognition and, at times, monopolies.

In this model, autonomy and prestige are interdependent. Society grants privileges to professions because they fulfil essential roles requiring expertise and ethical responsibility. Autonomy ensures that these tasks are performed reliably, while ethical norms help maintain public trust by reducing information gaps between professionals and laypeople.

The critical turn: autonomy as result and instrument

From the 1960s and 1970s, the functionalist approach faced growing criticism. Eliot Freidson's research showed that professional practice often diverges from altruistic ideals.⁸ Pragmatism, experiential knowledge, and particularism influence decisions, and codes of ethics tend to serve as legitimising tools rather than genuine guidelines.

Andrew Abbott's systemic approach further radicalised this critique.⁹ Based on his own investigations, he argued that professions are not self-contained, harmoniously cooperating units, but rather occupational groups in constant competition, striving for jurisdiction over certain areas of the social division of labour. In this context, autonomy is not a departure point but a result: the consequence of the successful mobilisation of political, organisational, and cultural resources.

Building on these findings, critical perspectives, such as Randall Collins's conflict theory, view professions as collective interest groups competing for economic

7 Parsons, *The Social System*.

8 Freidson, *Profession of Medicine*; Freidson, *Professional Powers*.

9 Abbott, *The System of Professions*.

and status advantages.¹⁰ In this framework, autonomy is a tool used to maintain monopolies and exclude competitors.

Particularly relevant in the Central European context is the analysis by György Konrád and Iván Szelényi, who examined socialist society in light of ‘new class theories.’ In *The Intellectuals*, they showed that in the socialist system, the intelligentsia sought class power through control over state redistribution.¹¹ In this interpretation, autonomy was not a condition for serving the public, but a means of acquiring and maintaining privileges. In other words, the intellectual professions were fighting for privileges rather than for the common good.

Autonomy as a fragile and shifting attribute

A critical conflict-oriented strand of literature suggests that professions operate in an ongoing competition for power and control, implying that previously secured privileges may be subject to erosion. This line of reasoning underpins much of the deprofessionalisation debate.

It is further argued that as expertise is institutionalised and professionals are increasingly embedded in bureaucratic organisations, while their autonomy may decline. In such contexts, professional work is often subject to organisational constraints, procedural standardisation, and managerial oversight. Paradoxically, the growing societal and institutional value of expertise, alongside the expansion of expert labour within state and market bureaucracies, may contribute to the reconfiguration of professional autonomy. Under these conditions, professional tasks may become more routinised and formally regulated.

A critical contribution to this debate is Marie R. Haug’s 1973 article *Deprofessionalization: An Alternative Hypothesis for the Future*. Haug argues that the historically expanding authority and autonomy of professions should not be understood as a linear or irreversible process. Instead, she identifies structural developments (such as the increasing accessibility of specialised knowledge, technological change, and the growing capacity of non-professionals to evaluate expert work) that may weaken professional monopolies and challenge established forms of occupational authority. In this perspective, deprofessionalisation refers to a potential erosion of professional control and status rather than a deterministic outcome, highlighting the contingent nature of professional dominance in modern societies.¹²

A common thread of these theories is that they view professionalisation not as linear progress but as a non-linear and potentially reversible process, in which

10 Collins, *The Credential Society*.

11 Konrád and Szelényi, *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*.

12 Haug, “Deprofessionalization.”

periods of triumph (e.g., the golden age of the nineteenth–twentieth centuries) are followed by waves of deprofessionalisation.

In the knowledge-based economy, the mass influx of intellectuals into bureaucratic state apparatuses and private-sector organisations—think of the integration of doctors, lawyers, or engineers into corporate structures—only appeared to strengthen professional positions.¹³ Paradoxically, however, this has actually worked against professionalisation: autonomy has become a fragile, shifting attribute. It is clear that the right to self-determination—regarded as one of the pillars of professionalisation—is far from being a fixed attribute. It is a context-dependent resource that may weaken or transform in response to external pressures. Several mechanisms are identifiable in these processes. First, ‘deskilling,’ in which complex tasks are simplified and bound to protocols—for example, through algorithmic assistance in medical diagnostics.¹⁴ Second, ‘managerialism,’ where professional decision-making is increasingly shaped by organisational management, performance metrics, and efficiency criteria.¹⁵ Third, ‘commodification,’ which reduces services to marketable products, where the patient or client is reduced to a ‘consumer’ and the professional to a salesperson (examples include ‘degree mills’ also found in higher education). Finally, ‘task shifting,’ in which traditional responsibilities are delegated to less qualified personnel (e.g., assistants), often for the purpose of reducing costs. These processes do not erode professional fields in isolation. They work in an intertwined manner, as situated within the broader historical account of the rise of professional society provided by Harold Perkin.¹⁶

At the same time, studies analysing deprofessionalisation do not necessarily emphasise a linear decline. Alternative visions emerge in studies that highlight the professions’ adaptation strategies. One such strategy is ‘organising professionalism,’ where professions proactively develop new techniques, hybrid roles, and inter-professional coalitions, aiming not to eliminate hybridity but to move beyond its unstructured forms by embedding organising capacities within professional practice.¹⁷ For example, in healthcare, multidisciplinary teams (collaboration of doctors, nurses, and data analysts) create a new kind of collective autonomy that transcends the traditional individualistic model. Finally, theories of deprofessionalisation also include the process of ‘disintegration.’ This is not a strategy, but rather the observation that certain areas are suffering a partial or complete loss of status—think of traditional journalists in digital media—which may result in a radical transformation or even the fragmentation of the profession.

13 Freidson, *Professionalism*; Abbott, *The System of Professions*; Collins, *The Credential Society*.

14 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

15 Noordegraaf, “Hybrid Professionalism and Beyond.”

16 Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*.

17 Noordegraaf, “Hybrid Professionalism and Beyond.”

The preceding sections have examined how professions were conceived and how the social sciences, particularly sociology, have interpreted them. The following chapter presents the historical development of professional autonomy, comparing trends in Western and Eastern Europe.

Changes in the relationship between professionalisation and autonomy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

We examine the historical development of professional autonomy by first considering global, international processes, then focusing on continental European (non-Anglo-Saxon) characteristics, and finally addressing the specific features of Central Europe, particularly Hungary. Comparing characteristics observed at different levels and across various fields elucidates not only individual cases but also the way the socio-economic context shapes the self-determination of professions. The process ranges from initial institutionalisation to dominance, narrowing, and contemporary hybrid forms. As previously noted, professionalisation is not linear; it evolves through interactions with the state, the market, and other social actors. In this context, autonomy functions both as a result and a tool for maintaining the balance of power. Examining the history of individual professions from this perspective in Central and Eastern Europe yields new insights into both the professions themselves and the broader political, economic, and social contexts of the countries compared.

The emergence of modern professions is inseparable from the rise of capitalism and the nineteenth-century wave of social specialisation. In her work *The Rise of Professionalism*, Magali S. Larson provides a detailed analysis of how professional markets were organised, where knowledge-based services became commodities, while formal training systems deepened professionalism.¹⁸ It was at this time that professions began to establish their own control mechanisms—codes of ethics, membership rules, and accreditation procedures—which later formed the basis of their autonomy. This process was not merely technical but also served to establish social legitimacy: in this way, the professions positioned themselves between the growing bureaucratic state and the free market while building a monopoly over their knowledge.

The example of medicine is particularly instructive. In the United Kingdom, the Medical Act (1858) marked a turning point, establishing the General Medical Council. This institution standardised the registration of medical qualifications, thereby strengthening the profession's internal regulation and monopoly. A similar transformation took place in the United States through the 1910 Flexner Report, which radically reformed medical education: it placed it on a university foundation, strengthened ties

18 Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism*.

with hospitals, and thereby reinforced the monopoly on professional competencies.¹⁹ The report had a far-reaching impact, standardising norms and reducing opportunities for lay intervention. Similar processes unfolded in other fields as well. In Great Britain, for example, the Elementary Education Act (1870) established the framework for mass education, with local school boards that contributed to the institutionalisation of the teaching profession and the development of its professional standards. Not only did these milestones bring about regulation but they also laid the foundations for autonomy: professions thus gained control over the specialised knowledge that characterised them while social trust was also strengthened.

In the second third of the twentieth century, the professions reached a peak often referred to as the ‘golden age.’ This was the period when the theoretical assumptions of the classical functionalist model most closely approximated reality: professions were characterised by a high degree of autonomy, self-regulation, and professional monopolies, keeping a distance both from lay and state control. Once again, medicine serves as an example: according to Freidson, it represented the fullest autonomy, in which decisions were made on the basis of professional knowledge and ethical norms, with minimal external interference.²⁰ The legal profession was structured similarly: lawyers and judges were subject to strong bar association control, which ensured decision-making monopolies (e.g., in contract interpretation and litigation). Parsons’ and Abbott’s analyses point out that this dominance was no accident: the professions played a key role in social integration, contributing to the stability of the welfare state emerging after industrialisation.²¹

However, this period was not without conflict. ‘Jurisdictional battles’ (Abbott) arose, such as disputes between doctors and pharmacists over therapeutic decisions. Despite these conflicts, stable autonomy fostered social trust, with professions seen as neutral, expertise-based contributors to the social equilibrium.

From the late 1970s onward, the wave of neoliberal reforms—particularly the New Public Management (NPM) approach—radically altered the autonomy of the professions. Christopher Hood’s work summarises how NPM principles became widespread: performance measurement, audits, market-oriented mechanisms, and accountability requirements infiltrated public services, restricting the freedom of professional decision-making.²² This represented a fundamental paradigm shift: efficiency and accountability replaced expertise, confirming the tensions and situations raised by theories of deprofessionalisation.

19 Flexner, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*.

20 Freidson, *Professional Powers*; Parsons, “Levels of Organization and the Mediation of Social Interaction.”

21 Parsons, *The Social System*; Abbott, *The System of Professions*.

22 Hood, *The Art of the State*; Hood, “A Public Management for all Seasons?”

Today, professional autonomy is fragmented: it has been preserved in some areas (e.g., research decisions), while in others it is heavily regulated (e.g., administrative routines). The picture is further complicated by such previously unknown factors as digitalisation, evidence-based practices, consumer expectations, and data-driven audits.²³

Continental characteristics of professionalisation

Having reviewed global trends, it is important to detail the continental model of professionalisation, which has shaped Central European developments and offers a contrast to the dominant Western European narrative. Continental professionalisation, unlike the Anglo-Saxon model, is state-driven, with the state regulating training, licensing, and practice from above. In Germany, this model is rooted in the Prussian bureaucratic traditions, where professions emerged through state intervention and administrative systems rather than market forces. Professions are often seen as ‘bureaucratic vocations,’ in which autonomy means legal status through state-guaranteed monopolies but also involves institutional dependence and collective subordination to hierarchies.²⁴

This model differs from the Anglo-Saxon (British-American) version, where professionalisation is organised from the bottom up through market competition and self-regulating associations (e.g., professional associations), emphasising individual autonomy and ‘jurisdictional battles.’ In the continental framework, however, autonomy is not primarily the result of professional struggles but is guaranteed by the state as a legal framework from the outset. This situation gives rise to entirely different strategies for the professions.²⁵ For example, the professionalisation of German engineers during nineteenth-century industrialisation took place in state technical educational institutions (e.g., polytechnics) and the bureaucracies of large corporations (such as Siemens), where professionals worked according to civil service traditions, that is, with limited individual autonomy but strong collective status. This model—in which the state is both patron and controller—is particularly relevant to Central Europe, where similar state traditions can be observed.

Professionalisation in Central Europe, particularly Hungary, generally follows the continental model, but historical events—dualism, world wars, socialism, and democratisation—have created a unique path. Rather than simply copying Western

23 Chilingirian, “Origins of DRGs in the United States.”

24 Siegrist, “The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Europe.”

25 McClelland, “Zur Professionalisierung der akademischen Berufe in Deutschland.”

models, local adaptations and the tension between state control and local autonomy have produced a distinctive structure.²⁶

During the era of dualism in the nineteenth century, the process of professionalisation gained momentum in Hungary. State legislation promoted, initiated, and regulated this process in several areas. József Eötvös's 1868 Elementary School Act, for example, introduced compulsory education, consolidating the institutional framework and ethical standards of the teaching profession, while the 1883 Secondary School Act did the same for second-level education. Parallely, from 1861, the medical profession was strengthened through the founding of the Royal Hungarian Medical Association. This period bears the hallmarks of continental state regulation: through the bureaucratic traditions of the Habsburg era, professions were given legal foundations, but their dependence on central authority remained. This dependence, however, was only partial because, due to historically strong religious and class-based autonomies, a uniquely fragmented and simultaneously competitive structure emerged in the field of education, for example, where state modernisation efforts could only be realised through modifications.

In the second phase, lasting until the mid-twentieth century, partial professional dominance emerged, accompanied by self-organisation into professional chambers. During the interwar period, the professions—doctors, lawyers, and teachers—developed stronger self-regulatory mechanisms, thereby increasing their professional autonomy. Alongside traditional professions, by following the models provided by them and adopting their tools, so-called semi-professional professions (e.g., agronomists) were also able to strengthen their boundaries in an increasing number of ways.²⁷

The socialist era brought about a dramatic shift in the number of professions: strong state centralisation led to a radical decline in autonomy. Following World War II and the communist takeover, Central European states curtailed professional autonomy through centralisation and ideology-driven control. While emphasising all this, it is important to note that in certain professions, particularly in the cultural sphere (e.g., book publishing and film production) and, to some extent, in healthcare, paradoxically, professional autonomy was strengthened, as nationalisation and the extreme state control that accompanied it simultaneously eliminated both secular and market influences, resulting in the emergence of specific forms of professional autonomy. The significance of this phenomenon was particularly evident after the 1989 transition, when representatives of these professions (such as book publishers) suddenly found themselves facing market pressures, or—as in the fields of education and healthcare, for example—the demand for increasingly strong secular control.

26 Keller, *Experten und Beamte*, 249–64.

27 Kiss, “Eredmények és kudarcok.”

The reforms of the 1990s present a mixed picture: market liberalisation was intertwined with regulations accompanying EU integration, introducing new oversight mechanisms (e.g., financial audits). Today, hybridity prevails in Central Europe, similar to Western trends but with a post-socialist legacy: autonomy is fragmented, and continental bureaucratic roots clash with the management logics imported from neoliberalism, often leading to a further erosion of professional autonomy.

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The two studies in our block are rooted in the methodological and theoretical tradition outlined above, and we expect them to stimulate the professional discourse on professions in Central Europe.

Gergely Magos examines the professionalisation of pharmacists in Ireland and Hungary. He contends that analyses of professionalisation models should not focus solely on macro-level imperial centres. Understanding similarities and differences requires attention to social processes in peripheral regions. This approach highlights the significance of local developments and offers a more nuanced view of the distinctions between continental and Anglo-Saxon models.

Viktor Papp's study investigates the professionalisation of the legal profession in the two halves of the Habsburg Monarchy, Cisleithania and Hungary, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. His main finding is that although Austrian and Hungarian lawyers developed within broadly similar legal and institutional frameworks, their trajectories were shaped by different social and economic factors. While the Austrian legal profession remained more closely tied to institutionally guaranteed state positions, a substantial proportion of Budapest lawyers sought opportunities in the economic sphere, serving in corporations, on boards of directors, and in in-house legal positions. The study demonstrates that professionalisation, even in its continental form, was not a simple outcome of legal reforms but rather emerged through the interaction of state regulation, professional autonomy, and market competition.

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